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AUTHOR McCoy, Donna; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A study surveyed independent reading habits and identified causal factors related to the decline in independent reading from middle school to college. Subjects, 100 students enrolled in a developmental reading course at a state-supported university in Kentucky, completed a 19-item survey instrument. A second survey was developed due to the results of the college survey which indicated a decrease in recreational reading at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels. Subjects in the second survey, 80 seventh- and eighth-grade students enrolled in a middle school located in a small university community and 79 subjects enrolled in a rural county middle school, completed a 25-item survey with questions similar to those on the college-level survey. Results of both surveys indicated that: (1) there was a significant decrease in recreational reading at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels; (2) a majority of students reported that they enjoyed reading independently as elementary students; and (3) recreational reading ranked among the lowest of leisure activities. Findings suggest that low reading proficiencies of college students may be the results of a decline in reading during the middle school years rather than a specific reading problem. To maintain and continue development of recreational reading during this critical period, approaches which acknowledge the existence of other interests of adolescents and attempt to blend with or complement these interests (readings related to interests, in-class silent reading, social reading groups) are the most likely to lead to success. (One table of data is included; 18 references are attached.) (RS)

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Surveys of Independent Reading: Pinpointing the Problems, Seeking the Solutions

Donna McCoy

Barbara Larson

Bonnie Higginson

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Murray State University

Murray, Kentucky 42071

Running Head: INDEPENDENT READING

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Promoting recreational reading has long been an aim for reading practitioners at all grade levels. There is general agreement among teachers, parents, and reading experts that time spent reading enhances children's reading skill development. Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading (1985) suggests that, "increasing the amount of time children read ought to be a priority for both parents and teachers" (p. 77). Research indicates that the amount of leisure time spent reading is directly related to students' reading comprehension, vocabulary, and reading fluency (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Fielding, Wilson & Anderson, 1984; Greaney, 1980; Greaney & Hegarty, 1984; Leinhardt, Zigmond & Cooley, 1981). For example, Greaney (1980) found a positive relationship between the amount of time spent reading at home and the reading achievement of elementary age children. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) found that among fifth grade students' leisure activities, time spent reading at home had the most significant positive influence on gains in reading achievement between the second and fifth grade. Since there is a strong correlation between quantity of reading and reading achievement, students should be encouraged and

given ample opportunities to engage in recreational or independent reading.

A considerable amount of research has been devoted to the development of independent reading at the elementary level (e.g., Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Greaney, 1980; Greaney & Hegarty, 1987; Morrow, 1986; Taylor, 1990). This has led to many programs and activities designed to encourage independent reading at both the preschool and early elementary levels. With the exception of Hartley's (1990) design for a middle level independent reading program, there is a notable absence of programs for students at the seventh through twelfth grade levels. Relatively little research has been conducted to promote independent reading among seventh through twelfth grade students. Recently, however, Manna, Misheff & Robitaille (1988) conducted a survey with middle school students which found that these students do indeed read for pleasure. Their findings led them to strongly recommend independent reading both within and outside the formal school setting.

The early adolescent is at a critical juncture for forming life-long reading habits. However, it appears that opportunities for independent reading in school

and out of school decline at this critical developmental stage. There is some evidence which indicates that the amount of time given to leisure book reading decreases rapidly as children get older (Maxwell, 1977; Whitehead, Capey & Maddren, 1975). Moreover, Reed (1988) noted that, while reading interests peak around age 12, many readers lose interest in books at that age. Clary (1991) also claims that reading often decreases in adolescence. In addition, college reading practitioners often lament that few of their students report reading for recreational purposes. A multitude of factors may contribute to the lack of independent reading. Many of these factors may stem from changes in reading habits which occur during the middle grades.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to report the results of two distinct surveys designed to measure independent reading habits and identify causal factors related to the decline in independent reading from middle school to college. Based upon these results, suggestions for promoting independent reading with older learners are offered.

College Recreational Reading Survey

Given the authors' experience in teaching college developmental reading, it was suspected that students enrolled in such courses have experienced a decline in independent reading at some level. Developmental reading students are required to submit a journal in which they reflect on their reading habits and experiences. In the course of reading literally thousands of student journals over a period of ten years, the authors were struck by a consistent, common thread. An overwhelming majority of the students reported that they had been provided with an adequate reading foundation and enjoyed reading independently during childhood, but subsequently experienced a decreased interest in reading.

In order to verify the existence of this decline in reading and to determine the level at which it occurs, a survey was developed and administered to college level students. The instrument contained nineteen items which dealt with early reading experiences, changes in reading habits from elementary to the middle grades, changes from the middle grades to high school, and current reading habits.

The questionnaire was administered to 100 students enrolled in a developmental reading course at a state-supported university in Kentucky. Course instructors administered the survey during class at the midpoint of the fall, 1990 semester. Subjects represented approximately two-thirds of the total enrollment in the reading and study strategies class for that semester. Students were recommended to take the course based on low (below 18) ACT entrance exam scores.

Middle School Recreational Reading Survey

A second survey was developed due to the results of the college survey which indicated a decrease in recreational reading at the seventh and eighth grade level. The middle school survey contained twenty-five items, including questions similar to those on the college survey regarding early reading experiences and changes in reading habits from elementary to the middle grades.

The survey was administered to 159 seventh and eighth grade students representing a wide reading ability, ranging from remedial to gifted. Eighty subjects were enrolled in a middle school located in a small university community. Seventy-nine subjects were

enrolled in a rural, county middle school. Subjects represented approximately half of the seventh and eighth grade students enrolled at both schools, both of which have a majority white population. English, social studies, math, and health teachers administered the survey during class time in October, 1990.

Comparison of Survey Results

The data collected from both surveys revealed that there is indeed a significant decrease in recreational reading at the seventh and eighth grade levels. Most of the students surveyed claimed that they had been provided with an adequate reading foundation. Eighty-nine percent of the college students and 95% of the seventh and eighth grade students were read to before they learned to read. Both surveys indicated that 88% of the students had teachers that read to them throughout elementary school. However, 76% of the college students and 73% of the seventh and eighth grade students reported that teachers stopped reading to them by the seventh grade. It appears that oral reading to students shifts to a lower priority by the upper middle school level.

Survey results indicate that silent reading also shifts in priority by the seventh and eighth grade. A

majority of the college students reported that they enjoyed reading independently as elementary students, but by the seventh and eighth grades, only a minority of these students continued to enjoy reading independently.

The college students cited several reasons for the change in their reading habits. They most often reported that they were too busy to read or that they lost interest. When students were asked to rank their leisure activities according to the amount of time spent per day, the activities of watching television, participating in sports, and socializing with friends were consistently ranked at the top. On the other hand, recreational reading was consistently ranked the lowest.

While the seventh and eighth grade students surveyed also reported a decrease in oral and silent reading at their current grade level, 75% reported a continued interest in recreational reading. Still, when students were asked to rank their leisure activities, recreational reading was clearly their lowest ranked activity. For the seventh and eighth grade students, activities such as sports, television, homework, and socializing all were highly ranked

activities. A comparison of leisure activity rankings between the middle school and college level students is summarized in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

The findings of the two surveys, though not surprising, offer evidence of the decline in recreational reading among early adolecents. A major implication of this study is that low reading proficiencies of college students, as evidenced by their placement in college developmental reading classes due to low entrance exam scores, may be the result of a decline in reading during the middle school years rather than a specific reading problem. Given this conclusion, it is critical that educators and parents attempt to prevent this downward shift in reading practices at the middle school level. The question remains, then, how can recreational reading be encouraged in this critical period? The following suggestions offer some potential solutions to this compelling problem.

Suggestions for Promoting Recreational Reading in the Middle Grades

While seventh and eighth grade students maintain an interest in reading recreationally, they have limited opportunities to do so because of competing interests. Students at this age level could be encouraged to read without eliminating their alternative leisure-time activities. It is possible to design programs which would merge recreational reading with the competing interests.

Many authors recommend capitalizing on the varied interests of adolescents by providing them with materials which correspond to their interests. There is currently a wealth of adolescent literature available. One recommended sourcebook for this literature is Comics to Classics (Reed, 1988), published by the International Reading Association. Nancie Atwell also has a list of popular adolescent books published in her book, In the Middle (1987). In addition, "Young Adult Choices" can be found annually in the Journal of Reading.

Magazines offer another form of high interest materials for adolescents. In particular, movie and

music reviews can complement the audio and video interests of adolescents.

Not only do students need access to a variety of materials if they are to maintain an interest in reading, they need to be provided with opportunities to read. Advocates of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) claim that providing time during class for recreational reading cultivates the habit of reading, both in and out of the classroom (Spiegel, 1981). Both middle school and college students who responded to the surveys reported in this article indicated that lack of time was a major causal factor of their decline in reading. By providing students with time to read recreationally within school, they may be encouraged to continue the habit outside of school.

Both surveys in the present study indicated that socializing with friends is a valued activity in early adolescence, and time spent socializing increases with each grade level. This finding led the authors to recommend the formation of small, informal reading discussion groups which merge the social interests of middle school students with their continued interest in reading. A test case of the reading discussion group concept was conducted among middle school students in

November, 1990 and met with such success that it continued throughout the academic year and following summer. Guidelines developed by Latta (1990) which were utilized in the formation of a reading discussion group are presented below.

Guidelines for Forming a Reading Discussion Group

1. Consult with the school librarian, guidance counselor, and/or reading teacher for names of students who have a wide range of interests, cultures, or backgrounds and who would benefit from participating in a reading discussion group.

2. Administer a reading interest inventory to each participating student and interview each student concerning his or her interests.

3. Based on interest inventory and interview results, choose a selection from a book or literary work for students to read prior to the discussion group meeting.

4. Send a typed letter to those students who will attend the first meeting. The letter should contain all pertinent information (i.e., reading to be discussed, location, time and date of the meeting) as well as a permission form for the parent(s) to sign.

5. Choose one discussion leader prior to each group meeting. Inform the leader that she/he is to introduce the literary work to be discussed and to serve as a guide in facilitating discussion.

6. After a brief discussion of the selection, the leader should open the discussion to any other books the students would like to share.

7. Before the meeting ends, discussion should focus on selection of the book or story to be read for the next meeting and identification of the next group leader.

To conclude, the responses of middle school and college students to the independent reading surveys dramatize the decline in recreational reading which tends to occur at the seventh and eighth grade levels. Students consistently reported that even though they had been provided with an adequate reading foundation and enjoyed reading as elementary students, their enthusiasm for and time spent in independent reading waned during their middle school years. Therefore, one challenge which currently faces reading educators is the maintenance and continued development of recreational reading during this critical period. Approaches which acknowledge the existence of other

interests of adolescents and attempt to blend with or complement these interests (readings related to interests, in-class silent reading, social reading groups) are the most likely approaches to lead to success.

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Table 1

Comparison of Activity Rankings Between College and 7th/8th Grade Students

Activity	7th/8th	College
Employment	8	2**
Extra-curricular Activities	6	*
Homework	3	3
Housework	*	6**
Other	*	6**
Recreational Reading	9	7
Shopping	7	*
Socializing with Friends	4	1
Sports/Exercise	1	2**
Stereo	5	5
Television/Video	2	4

*Not included in survey

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